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Visit us on the Internet at <http://www.danburychildrenfirst.org>

March 15, 2010

Re: In support of H.B. No. 5491 An Act Concerning Certain School District Reforms to Reduce the Achievement Gap in Connecticut

Dear Education Co-Chair Senator Gaffey and Co-Chair Representative Fleischmann, and Education Committee Members,

On behalf of Danbury Children First and the Danbury School Readiness Council¹, I urge your support of *H.B. No. 5491 An Act Concerning Certain School District Reforms to Reduce the Achievement Gap in Connecticut*. In particular, our community is very concerned with the achievement gap, and reform is required to make needed changes. I would like to highlight two areas of the bill:

- 1) Parent-teacher conferences required twice a year; and
- 2) Effectiveness of teachers and administrators through evaluation tied to student progress.

Parent-teacher conferences

The underlying rationale for requiring two parent teacher conferences a year is to provide dedicated time for the adults who care about the child's education the most, the parents and the teachers, to discuss and work together to support the student in the best way possible. Requiring two parent-teacher conferences a year elevates these essential dialogues so that our students are supported by the adults the care the most for them and their education, and requires no funding, just an adjustment in our priorities for educators and parents to communicate more frequently and effectively. We would ask that you add to the bill the requirement that schools and districts report the parent participation rates to measure their commitment and effectiveness in carrying out these essential conversations, and that these are reported in the School District Profiles.

Currently the law does not require any parent-teacher conferences. Schools in Connecticut offer one, two or no parent teacher conferences currently, and there is no tracking of parent participation rates. Some educators have an open door policy for parents where they can request meetings with teachers, and for parents who understand the education system and their role in it this is fine; however, to close the achievement gap we need to assure that all parents have the benefit of speaking directly to their child's teachers at least two times a year. This legislation helps to bring equity to education, by assuring that all parents are offered and are using the parent teacher conferences to help their children achieve in school.

¹ The importance of parent-teacher conferences and proposal into legislation was originally developed by Danbury Children First's Parents as Partners in Education Committee which is a local group including parents, teachers, school principals, administrators, and community members at large. It also has the endorsement of Danbury School Readiness Council as part of their policy agenda and supports Danbury's early childhood plan, the 3Rs, Ready Children and Families, Ready Community, Ready Schools.

The mission of Danbury Children First is to involve, empower and support parents to improve the lives of children.

Parent teacher conferences are one of the ways that parents and teachers communicate. The parent knows the child best, as the first nurturer, teacher and role model. We have spoken with hundreds of parents and they all want the best education for their children. This is true regardless of their income level, racial or ethnic heritage, age, or education level. We also know that teachers are in the field of education because they want the best education for students.

The parent brings the most complete knowledge of the child, and the teacher brings the knowledge of the desired learning outcomes for the child, the curriculum, and can explain to the parents how they can support the child's learning at home. At the same time, the parent can explain what impacts the child's learning from their perspective of the home and neighborhood.

Parents come from very diverse backgrounds and educational experiences. Their understanding of what it takes to support their child get a good education varies based on their own experiences with education, and their level of education. For example, for parents who have had little education, they may not understand how to support learning at home, or how to support the child toward higher education. Through communication with the teacher, they can learn what is expected of them to help their child at home.

Teachers' education and requirements for certification do not include the subject of how to involve parents. Yet parental involvement is a proven strategy for student success. By speaking one on one with parents, teachers can involve parents in what they know best- supporting learning.

The goal of every school should be 100% participation of parents in parent-teacher conferences. This bill will also encourage leadership at the schools to reach for more communication with parents, a proven key to improving student success.

Effectiveness of teachers and administrators

The language in the bill linking teacher and administrator effectiveness, measured by evaluations tied to student progress is in line with the White House Initiative's priorities for reform. This includes the development of state standards for teacher standards and evaluation linked to student progress. Student progress itself will also be better tracked as a result, providing the information needed to ensure that each student is progressing. In addition, the White House Initiative is reforming No Child Left Behind to include incentives, rather than penalties to improve schools in several areas, and this is one of them. Connecticut will be positioned better for the possibility of federal funding in FY 2011.

If you would like more information, please contact me at (203)797-8088 or Lindak@danburychildrenfirst.org

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony.

Sincerely,



Linda A. Kosko
Executive Director